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ABSTRACT

In this era of rapid globalization of business opportunities, many managers face the need to communicate with foreign counterparts who do not speak English. The solution, in many cases, is to use an interpreter. Interpreters, however, may make mistakes, and irritation, embarrassment and even major problems may arise from errors in translation. This paper discusses techniques and strategies for using interpreters in international business in such a way as to avoid miscommunication or misinterpretation. They include: providing the interpreter with a written text or outline; using professionals; having an interpreter for both parties in a negotiation; awareness of the interpreter's physical and emotional state; watching for signs that the listener is stressed, fatigued, or confused; speaking slowly and pronouncing clearly; avoiding oversimplification or appearance of condescension; speaking to one's counterpart, not the interpreter; avoiding slang or jargon; using charts and diagrams for clarity; using only metaphors, analogies, or allusions that are familiar to the foreign counterpart; being aware of false cognates; avoiding humor or satire; attending to precision in terminology; and practicing use of an interpreter before the need arises. (MSE)

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DON'T GET LOST IN THE TRANSLATION

By: Gary M. Wederspahn

In this era of rapid globalization of business opportunities and challenges, many managers are finding themselves faced with the need to communicate with foreign counterparts who do not speak English. This linguistic barrier occurs when hosting foreign investors in the United States and during business trips abroad. The solution, in many cases, is to use an interpreter. However, this skill is definitely an art, not a science, and miscommunications are common. The results can be humorous: "Ladies may have a fit upstairs" (Sign in a Hong Kong tailor shop), confusing: "Bite the wax tadpole" (Coca-Cola trade name translated into Chinese), and possibly dangerous: "Stop! Drive car sideways!" (Detour sign in Kyushu, Japan).

The confusion generated by faulty translation generally ranks as a minor irritation adding to the frustration and cost of cross-language business transactions. However, in some cases, major problems may be created by inaccurate interpretation. For example, following a concession made by his foreign counterpart, an American negotiator noted with relief: "this makes it a whole new ball game." The interpreter translated this statement literally so that his counterparts believed he doubted their seriousness and thought that they were just playing around. The process of trust building was seriously set back by this incident. Likewise, the cause of international diplomacy was not helped when an interpreter told a gathering of Polish dignitaries that President Carter was interested in their "lusts" rather than their "desires" for the future.

The following are techniques and strategies for using interpreters that will help international business people reduce the risk of being misinterpreted and misunderstood:

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- Provide your interpreter with a written text or, at least, an outline of what you intend to communicate. In situations requiring specialized or technical vocabulary also provide a glossary of terms.

- Use professional interpreters. Effective translation is a demanding skill. Relying on bilingual colleagues to informally interpret in business dealings with outsiders may place unreasonable demands on them and lower their prestige in countries where the interpreter's role is one of low status.

- Both parties in a negotiation should employ their own interpreters. Depending entirely on a single interpreter places an unfair burden on that person. In addition, he or she will unconsciously represent the interests of his/her employee which may cause subtle changes in what you communicate and receive in return.

- Be aware of the interpreter's physical and emotional state (tiredness, hunger, stress, alcohol consumption, etc.) These factors may have negative impact on the quality of the translation.

- Watch for signs of listener fade out. Remember that the unnaturalness and difficulty of using an interpreter may be causing stress and fatigue in your listener.

- Speak slowly and pronounce clearly. Limit your sentences to simple short

ones. Pause after each three or four sentences. Plan your presentation so that each group of sentences conveys a single topic or unit of the broader subject.

- Avoid over simplifying and giving the appearance of being condescending.

- Talk to the person with whom you are dealing, not to the interpreter. Maintain eye contact, if culturally appropriate, and convey interpersonal interest non-verbally.

- Avoid the use of slang, specialized sports terms, jargon, idiomatic and colloquial expressions. Use "standard English". Be aware of your own regional accent.

- Make use of charts, diagrams, photographs, outlines and other visual aids. Often a single picture is worth a thousand words.

- If you choose to use metaphors, analogies or literary allusions, be sure they are familiar to your listener and are commonly understood within the local cultural context.

- Be aware of defective cognatives. These are words that sound similar in both languages but have very different meanings. "Demand" in French, for example, means "ask" not "to demand". "Discuss" in English can be easily mistranslated in Spanish as "Discutir" which denotes dissension and argument.

- Do not use jokes, satire or other attempts at humor. They rarely translate well and frequently result in bafflement at best and unintended insult at worst.

- Expressions that are, by nature, somewhat vague and imprecise such as "high quality" or "as soon as possible" are prone to cultural as well as linguistic misunderstanding. Use of specific quantifiable terms will help avoid this problem.

- o Carefully monitor the listener's facial expressions for signs of confusion. When in doubt regarding the clarity of the message received, ask for a reverse translation. This technique is a valuable, yet non-intrusive, check on accuracy.

- o Practice using an interpreter before being in a situation of having to do so. Learning to use the skills and techniques above requires time and effort.

Hopefully, these tips will enable the international business traveler to avoid causing the kind of puzzlement one interpreter must have felt when his American client gave the following request for dinner: "Hold the sauce and scratch the potatoes but really lay on the meat."

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